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FM IRAN RPO DUBAI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0162  
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE  
RUEHDIR/IRAN RPO DUBAI 0155  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDHP/DIA DHP-1 WASHINGTON DC  
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0146  
RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI 0112

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000051

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/16/2017

TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#)

SUBJECT: IRANIAN NGOS UNDER PRESSURE, BUT CONTINUE TO OPERATE  
QUIETLY

REF: A) RPO DUBAI 0017; B) 2006 RPO DUBAI 0009

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Acting Director, Iran Regional  
Presence Office, Department of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: NGOs in Iran remain under heavy pressure and scrutiny, a graduate student who is active with NGOs there told IRPO. Many continue to operate, albeit more quietly. One tool the government has used to intimidate NGOs is to keep them in uncertain legal status. The student recounted her experiences with NGOs promoting women's rights, including being beaten by security forces at a women's rights rally. Nonetheless, she was optimistic in the long-term for an improvement in women's rights in Iran and made clear that there are very courageous people in Iran working on this issue. End summary.

2.(C) A student involved in women's rights issues in Iran told IRPOffs that while the government has increased pressure on NGOs and activists in Iran, it has not succeeded in halting their activities. The student, in Dubai to apply for a student visa for graduate studies in the US, said she has worked with the NGO of Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, although only at a low level. She said she is also a member of the "Million Signatures" campaign for women's rights. The goal of the "Million signatures" campaign ([www.wechange.info](http://www.wechange.info)) in Iran is two-fold:

- to educate Iranian women about their legal status under current Iranian law
- to change laws regarded as discriminatory against women (Ref A).

3.(C) The student said the government is even opposed to their work trying to educate women about the rights they have under current laws. She said that she and others who were gathering signatures have been harassed at times by government authorities. During the March 8, 2007 women's rights rally in Tehran, she said her friend was arrested and imprisoned, and she herself was beaten by security forces so badly that she could not walk for two weeks. (Note: In early August, student activists Nasim Sarbandi and Fatemeh Dehdashti were each convicted to six months imprisonment and two year suspended

sentences for collecting signatures at a Tehran metro station for the "Million Signatures" campaign. Sarbandi told reformist news site "Rooz" that she and Dehdashti were convicted simply for collecting signatures, which the government views as publicity work against the Islamic Republic, or acting against national security. End note.)

4.(C) The student said she also helped found four years ago a small NGO called Vistamehr Human Rights Organization (Anjoman-e Yari Resan-e Hoghooghe Bashar). Officially they have about 30 members, she claimed, but only about half are active. She indicated that the group's funding comes only from its members and a few donors, and they try not to have any contacts with the government. She noted that they no longer update the NGO's website (www.vistamehr.com) because the organization has not been allowed to re-register and therefore is not licensed. (Note: In 2006, the government invalidated the registrations of all NGOs and required them to re-register for permission to operate. The government has reportedly delayed or refused the re-registration applications of many NGOs. Ref B. End note.)

5.(C) Nonetheless, the student said, the group continues its activities. They organized a workshop for young girls on HIV and drugs and distributed informational pamphlets, despite the taboo surrounding the subjects of AIDS and sexual activity. The group also holds weekly talks for young women to inform them of their rights and discuss women's issues, and regular lectures on various social and cultural issues. In one, Italian Ambassador to Iran Roberto Toscano spoke on "Ethics and Humanity and its effect on political relations." For security reasons, she added, access is by personal invitation only.

6.(C) Comment: The interlocutor is an educated young Iranian woman who appeared to care deeply about the issue of women's rights in Iran. She did not seem overly worried about any personal negative consequences from her activities. She was optimistic in the long-term for an improvement in women's rights in Iran and made clear that there are very courageous people in Iran working on this issue, despite the current crackdown on

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NGOs by the government. She is leaving the country for a graduate program in engineering in the US but claimed she would continue her work on this issue after returning to Iran. We did not have the impression that it was the ongoing repression in Iran that was driving her desire to study abroad, rather the desire for a top-notch education.  
BURNS